

Long-Stay Patient Rate Remains Stable

Yet Discharge Rates Increase, Study Finds

Although the rate of patient discharges from skilled nursing facilities increased substantially between 1977 and 1999, the percentage of patients staying three or more years did not decrease nearly as significantly, according to a newly released study.

The study, "Nursing Homes, 1977-99: What has Changed, What Has Not?" was conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS).

The data were derived from the 1977, 1985, and 1999 National Nursing Home Surveys, also conducted by NCHS.

Analysis of the data showed, among other findings, that:

- The number of patients served by nursing facilities has increased;
- The size of the typical nursing facility has increased;
- The number and rate of discharges has increased; and
- The average length of stay has decreased.

Despite all this, the proportion of long-stay patients has not changed substantially, even as those staying less than three months has grown considerably, according to the study.

The average number of patients in a facility increased from 1.28 million in 1977 to 1.63 million by 1999, a 27 percent increase. At the same time, the number of beds increased 32 percent. The 16,200 nursing facilities in 1977 averaged 79 beds, a number that grew to 105 among the 18,000 facilities in

1999. The discharge rate per 100 nursing facility beds in 1977 was 86. But by 1999 that rate had increased to 134 per 100 beds, a 56 percent increase. The increase occurred as the hospital

NURSING FACILITY DISCHARGE RATE PER 100 BEDS (1977-1999)

Year	Discharge Rate (%)
1977	86.1
1985	77.4
1999	134.2

Source: CDC's National Center for Health Statistics

prospective payment system was implemented, which shortened hospital stays and increased Medicare-funded post-acute care in nursing facilities, according to the study.

"As expected, the increase in the discharge rate mirrors the growth in Medicare as the primary payer, given that Medicare is the predominant payer of short-term post-acute care,"

wrote Frederick Decker, the study's author.

Medicare was the primary payer for 11 percent of discharges in 1985, a figure that more than tripled to 39 percent in 1999. "Not surprisingly, a drop in the average length

of stay of discharged residents accompanied the increased discharge rate and the increase in Medicare as the payment source at discharge," Decker wrote.

In fact, patients who stayed less than three months were discharged at double the rate between 1977 and 1999, according to the study, from 46 to 92

discharges per 100 beds, and accounted for 95 percent of overall growth in the discharge rate.

"At the same time, the rate of discharge for persons with stays of three months or more has not changed significantly, implying that the proportion of long-stay residents has remained fairly stable," wrote Decker.

The study found that 27 percent of current patients have been in their nursing facilities for three years or more—down from 31 percent in 1977. Current patients are also older than their 1977 counterparts (see table, below).

As the nursing facility resident population has aged, their ability to perform activities of daily living has declined. In 1977, 30 percent could dress them-

PERCENT DISTRIBUTION OF PATIENTS BY AGE GROUP

Age Group	1977	1985	1999
85+	34.8	40.9	46.5
75-84	36	34.4	31.8
65-74	16.2	13.8	12
Under 65	13	10.9	9.7

Source: CDC's National Center for Health Statistics

selves, while only 13 percent could in 1999. Thirteen percent of patients could bathe themselves in 1977, but only 6 percent could in 1999.

In summary, wrote Decker, despite the increase of post-acute care in nursing facilities and the changes in discharge rate and length of stay, about 60 percent of patients have called their nursing facility home for at least one year. "These long-stay patients, and the needs of these patients served by nursing homes, had not been displaced markedly by the increase in post-acute care in nursing facilities," he wrote.

—Kathleen Vickery

The increase in the discharge rate mirrors the growth in Medicare as the primary payer.